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Yellow Vests (France): stay on the streets until Macron falls

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Danièle Obono, a deputy of La France Insoumise, speaks to Feyzi Ismail about the Yellow Vest movement, the police and the origins of Macron's crisis.



A popular initiative to put the banker in prison. Photo: Feyzi Ismail

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Feyzi Ismail - The Yellow Vest movement has exploded onto the political scene in France over the past few weeks. What are the origins of this movement and what is its political composition?

Danièle Obono - The movement started a month ago with an online petition protesting the fuel tax hike that was being discussed in parliament. A woman made a video about the petition, which went viral, and on 17 November protests were held in support of the petition in a number of urban and rural areas all over France. Over [a million people have now signed](#) the petition. The symbol of the yellow vest was used because in 2008 it became mandatory to have such a vest in your car for safety, in case you had a breakdown. People were arguing that they couldn't afford the tax increases, and that there are few alternatives to driving when a number of train stations in rural areas have been closed over the past decades.

Meanwhile, the government attempted to sell the tax hike by claiming it was to support a transition towards a greener economy. It was later revealed that only 20% was going to the transition, and that the government was using the rest to plug a deficit in the national budget. The reason for the deficit is because they had given €4 billion to the rich in tax relief: the Macron government has almost entirely abolished the solidarity tax and heavily reduced other taxes on the wealthy, such as on financial transactions. The movement started spreading and from the beginning it was already an anti-elite movement. Though some had voted for Macron, in regret, most of those participating say they didn't vote at all in the last general election. They were waiting to see if things would change with Macron but they have got worse. I think people are now absolutely fed up, and [suspending the fuel tax rise](#) has not made any difference because it had not been implemented yet.

Where is the movement taking place, what are its demands and what has been the government response so far?

The movement wasn't organised by the left, people just came out of nowhere. Everybody was surprised that people came out onto the streets and the fact that it happened all over the country. On 17 November there was already over 100,000 people in the whole of France, and mainly based outside Paris. The government tried to downplay it but everyone recognised that it was a success. And the more the government has tried to downplay it, the more it has fuelled anger. Very quickly it became more than just about the tax. Pensioners have been prominent and have come out saying that pensions have not kept up with inflation and many pensioners are under the poverty line.

What people want to know is whether they will have more money at the end of the month, that is the concern. This is a broad section of people, and so from across the political spectrum, including small businesspeople, some who voted for Le Pen, some for Macron and a big section who do not participate in the electoral process; the great majority are not activists. People have asked why the movement is not unified. I would say the main thing is they are now coming together around a common set of political demands. These demands were sent to MPs, and about two-thirds were more or less the demands of La France Insoumise – a left-leaning programme rather than a right-wing one. Most demands are focused on democracy – revoking elected officials and so on – and socio-economic demands. There are a few demands about immigrants: people who shouldn't be here should be sent back but we should help people. But that is the very nature of the movement; it is disorganised, there is no overall leadership, and it reflects wider society.

Macron has taken a real beating by dismissing the movement and attempting to make paltry concessions. How vulnerable do you think the government is?

Everybody is waiting for Macron to resign. You also have to understand that this is happening after the biggest political crisis of the government over the summer with [Benallagate scandal](#), when one of Macron's bodyguards – Alexandre Benalla – beat up protesters during the 1 May demonstrations earlier this year and was caught on tape. During that crisis, Macron put himself at the centre. This is why people are going to the Champs-Élysées now because during Benallagate Macron had been silent for a long time and when he finally spoke, he argued that if people are looking for responsibility and who is in charge then it's me. This was really provocative, and it weakened the government and it weakened Macron; [his popularity ratings plummeted](#).

After Benallagate came the resignation of Nicholas Hulot – the Minister of Ecology – on live radio. And the way he justified his resignation was very political: he argued that the [government is not serious about climate change](#) and that a neoliberal programme is not compatible with a green transition. Then Gerard Collomb, the Home Minister, resigned after arguing he [knew nothing about how Benalla](#) got onto the demonstration. Internal crisis after internal crisis, the government is becoming increasingly delegitimised. It took them two weeks to find a new minister and nobody knows who was in charge; in fact, there was nobody in charge and nobody wanted the job. The person who [finally took over has no authority](#). So this is a government that has now backed itself into a corner and has lost a huge amount of legitimacy since the protests began. Every time Macron speaks, but also every time he stays silent, people get angrier.

How much is the government relying on repression to solve this political crisis, and what is the composition of the police force? Are they sympathetic to protesters?

After the elections, there was a poll that showed that 50% of the police force in general and the gendarmes [voted for Marine Le Pen](#). Some sections of the police are surely infiltrated by fascist forces. And the way the government handled the 1 May demonstrations was they put the blame on the police force. In any other country the minister would have resigned, since the political responsibility for what happened should be on the government. But the more we learned about Benalla and how close he was to Macron, the more incredible it is that it took another 6 months for

him to leave. That's another reason why the crisis is so difficult now. The police were put to shame during Benallagate, and yet they have been overworked and are underpaid; most of them are working-class people. There was a certain resonance with the movement's slogans because many police officers saw their families in the movement. In some places during the first protests on 17 November but also in previous weeks, you had places [where the police famously took off their helmets](#), which is a sign they wouldn't charge.

And there are protesters who are calling on the police to join them and join the demonstrations. These are not regular demonstrators and that's why the police brutality is so shocking for these people - because they are close to them. And that has had a destabilising impact on the police force because most agree that they shouldn't be suppressing this movement. And if you think about the majority of the blockades outside Paris, they have gone well. There has been some violence and police brutality but the majority of the protests have been successful, because they shared something with the police and had an understanding with them. But it has obviously also been difficult for the police because they have been on duty for more than three weeks now and they are tired and pissed off. This could mean frightening consequences. As for the army, France is still under anti-terrorist laws and so part of the army has already been mobilised. But the answer is not about force, there has to be a political response. If the government had granted the minimum wage or made real concessions you wouldn't have had to mobilise the police because most of the protests would have been peaceful. On the contrary now, people don't even want to hear what Macron has to say.

What has been the involvement of the left and the trade unions? And what do the next few weeks hold in terms of further protests?

Some sections of the left and the trade unions have not supported the gilets jaunes even until now. I have to say that La France Insoumise supported the movement from the start. But we also had to find a balance - we didn't want to appear to be taking over the movement; we support their demands and defend the movement when they were called racist, sexist and so on. Some trade unions warned us, arguing that the movement is infiltrated by the far right. It turns out they had no real connection with the movement. But after the first couple of demonstrations this has started to shift because it's more complex than what everyone thought. And also much of the rank and file of the trade unions, part of them are simply more connected and were part of the demonstrations. Yes, there is some anti-migrant sentiment but that's not what unites the movement and most people don't want to be divided on those lines.

Now, more political forces are realising this and getting on board with the movement. I hope that people will come in their numbers next week. And if we manage to start to bring the movements together, in Paris and a few other places, this will be very important. The media, of course, always focuses on the violence; their strategy is clear, it's to intimidate people and to prevent people from coming out. But it's the government and the police that have instigated the violence; it's the police that have been told to shoot people with close-range tear gas and use water cannon and so on. And still [reports say that 75-80% of the public supports the movement](#). It's actually the government that is radicalising the people. The high school students mobilised occupations a few months ago over the university reform that would effectively close the door to working-class kids.

So the political demands now are that Macron should resign and a new general election should be held. It's clear that the parliament doesn't reflect the mood of the government, and you can't keep going like that. We are on the offensive in parliament and would like to put forward [a vote no confidence in the government](#). If we manage, it will be a referendum against Macron, and also against the EU. And while he still has the majority, if we can stay on the streets for a few more weeks the only thing that's left is to defeat him in the elections. Levels of repression are high and

that means the situation is unsustainable in political terms. The government could fall very soon.

P.S.

- Counterfire. December 10, 2018:

- <https://www.counterfire.org/interview/20030-france-stay-on-the-streets-until-macron-falls>

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